

VZCZCXYZ0019
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDMA #0381 1131103
ZNR UUUUU ZZH ZUI RUEWMCF7730 1131052
P 231103Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC0000
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
ZEN/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

UNCLAS DAMASCUS 000381

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: LOW TURNOUT, APATHY IN SYRIAN PARLIAMENTARY
ELECTIONS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: VISITS BY U.S. AND OTHER DIPLOMATIC OBSERVERS TO POLLING PLACES IN THE SYRIAN CAPITAL AND SMALL SURROUNDING CITIES SUGGESTED LOW VOTER TURNOUT DURING THE APRIL 22-23 ELECTIONS FOR SYRIA'S 250-MEMBER PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY. OFFICIAL SYRIAN NEWS OUTLETS, HOWEVER, CLAIMED THAT MORE THAN 7.6 MILLION VOTING CARDS HAD BEEN ISSUED TO SYRIANS AND THAT VOTER TURNOUT HAD BEEN HIGH. BY ALL REPORTS, THE ATMOSPHERE AT POLLING PLACES WAS CALM, WITH NO INDICATIONS OF VOTER INTIMIDATION AND ONLY ONE REPORT OF THE BUSSING OF VOTERS. POST CANNOT CONFIRM WIDESPREAD ANECDOTAL REPORTS CLAIMING THAT VOTE-BUYING OCCURRED. ALL PARTIES IN THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION BOYCOTTED THE ELECTIONS, INCLUDING ONE KURDISH PARTY THAT HAD PREVIOUSLY INDICATED IT WOULD FIELD A FULL SLATE OF CANDIDATES. ELECTION RESULTS ARE EXPECTED BY THE END OF THE WEEK, ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) VISITS BY U.S. AND OTHER DIPLOMATIC OBSERVERS TO POLLING PLACES IN THE SYRIAN CAPITAL AND SMALL SURROUNDING CITIES SUGGESTED LOW VOTER TURNOUT DURING THE 1.5-DAY BALLOTING FOR THE PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY. TURNOUT WAS ARGUABLY SOMEWHAT HIGHER ON THE SECOND DAY OF VOTING BUT STILL APPEARED LIGHT, ACCORDING TO ANECDOTAL OBSERVER REPORTS. (NOTE: U.S. DIPLOMATS WHO DID NOT HAVE OFFICIAL PERMISSION TO MONITOR THE BALLOTING OBSERVED FROM OUTSIDE THE POLLING PLACES. END NOTE) AT MANY STATIONS, CANDIDATE-SPONSORED MONITORS APPEARED TO OUTNUMBER VOTERS, ACCORDING TO OBSERVERS FROM THE U.S., AND OTHER DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS. A SYRIAN EMPLOYEE OF THE U.S. EMBASSY, WHO ENTERED FOUR DAMASCUS POLLING PLACES THE MORNING OF APRIL 22, DISCOVERED THAT ONLY 70 PERSONS HAD VOTED THERE IN THE FIRST FIVE HOURS, EVEN THOUGH EACH STATION WAS SET UP TO ACCOMMODATE 1,000 VOTERS. THE SAME EMPLOYEE VOTED ON APRIL 23 AT A POLLING PLACE IN A CONGESTED DOWNTOWN DAMASCUS NEIGHBORHOOD, OBSERVING THERE THAT MORE THAN 2,500 VOTERS HAD CAST BALLOTS, INDICATING HIGHER TURNOUT IN SOME SELECT LOCATIONS.

¶3. (U) OFFICIAL SYRIAN NEWS OUTLETS CLAIMED OVERALL HIGH VOTER TURNOUT. FOR EXAMPLE, A NEWS STORY BY THE SYRIAN ARAB NEWS AGENCY (SANA) REPORTED IN ITS LEAD: "CITIZENS THROUGHOUT ALL SYRIAN CITIES, TOWNS AND VILLAGES FLOCKED TO THE POLLING STATIONS TO EXERCISE THEIR RIGHT TO ELECT THEIR REPRESENTATIVES TO THE 9TH LEGISLATIVE TERM OF THE PEOPLES ASSEMBLY." THE OFFICIAL SYRIAN SATELLITE CHANNEL SHOWED CROWDED POLLING PLACES BUT DID NOT DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN VOTERS, CANDIDATE MONITORS AND VOTING OFFICIALS. BY ALL REPORTS, THE ATMOSPHERE AT VOTING STATIONS WAS CALM, WITH THE OVERALL SITUATION CHARACTERIZED BY STRONG CURRENTS OF VOTER

APATHY.

¶4. (SBU) THERE WAS ONLY ONE REPORT BY OBSERVERS FROM THE U.S. EMBASSY AND OTHER DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS OF UP TO 50 VOTERS BEING BUSSED BY AN UNKNOWN ENTITY TO A POLLING STATION IN THE DAMASCUS NEIGHBORHOOD OF MIDAN. THERE WERE NO REPORTS OF HEAVY SECURITY OUTSIDE STATIONS; INDEED MOST U.S. EMBASSY PERSONNEL OBSERVED ACROSS A RANGE OF STATIONS THE PRESENCE OF ONE OR TWO POLICEMEN AND, POSSIBLY, A FEW PLAIN-CLOTHES PERSONNEL. POST CANNOT CONFIRM WIDESPREAD ANECDOTAL REPORTS CLAIMING THAT VOTE-BUYING OCCURRED. A TEAM OF U.S. EMBASSY OBSERVERS IN THE CITY OF SAIDNAYA, ABOUT 20 MILES NORTH OF DAMASCUS, SAW ON APRIL 23 WHAT APPEARED TO BE ONE MAN AND ONE WOMAN WITH A HANDFUL OF VOTER CARDS SEPARATELY ENTERING A POLLING PLACE AT A CITY POST OFFICE.

¶5. (SBU) BACKGROUND: THE APPROXIMATELY 11,000 POLLING PLACES OPENED AT 0700 LOCAL ON APRIL 22 AND CLOSED AT 2000. SYRIAN ELECTIONS LAW STIPULATED THAT BALLOT BOXES WERE TO BE SEALED AT THE END OF THE FIRST DAY AND ONLY REOPENED BY VOTER OFFICIALS IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO VOTING AT 0700 ON APRIL 23. ELECTIONS WERE SCHEDULED TO END AT 1400 LOCAL ON APRIL 23. RESULTS WERE EXPECTED LATER IN THE WEEK, ACCORDING TO NEWS REPORTS. ABOUT 12 MILLION SYRIANS WERE ELIGIBLE TO VOTE (INCLUDING SYRIAN EXPATRIATES WHO WOULD HAVE TO RETURN TO SYRIA TO CAST A BALLOT), AND ABOUT 7.6 MILLION ELECTION CARDS HAD BEEN ISSUED AS OF LATE APRIL, ACCORDING TO SYRIAN INTERIOR MINISTER MAJOR GENERAL BASSAM ABDUL-MAJEED IN AN APRIL 18 INTERVIEW ON OFFICIAL SYRIAN TELEVISION. CITIZENS ELIGIBLE TO VOTE COULD OBTAIN ELECTION CARDS THROUGHOUT THE VOTING PROCESS. BY LAW, VOTERS WERE ALLOWED TO CAST A BALLOT IN ANY POLLING PLACE IN SYRIA FOR CANDIDATES IN THAT AREA SO, THEORETICALLY, A GROUP OF VOTERS FROM DAMASCUS COULD LEGALLY TRAVEL TO ANOTHER PART OF THE COUNTRY TO INFLUENCE POLLING RESULTS THERE. VOTING INSTRUCTIONS PUBLISHED IN MARCH NOTED THE CREATION OF VOTER CENTERS AT BORDER ENTRY POINTS, ESPECIALLY WITH LEBANON, "TO ENABLE INCOMING AND OUTGOING PASSENGERS THE RIGHT TO VOTE."

¶6. (SBU) APPROXIMATELY 2,500 CANDIDATES (INCLUDING 171 WOMEN) OF MORE THAN 10,000 PERSONS WHO INITIALLY SUBMITTED THEIR CANDIDACY REMAINED IN THE RACE FOR THE 250 SEATS IN THE ASSEMBLY. MANY CANDIDATES WHO SOUGHT BUT WERE NOT SELECTED FOR INCLUSION ON THE LIST OF THE BA'ATH PARTY-LED COALITION KNOWN AS THE NATIONAL PROGRESSIVE FRONT (NPF) SUBSEQUENTLY WITHDREW THEIR CANDIDACIES--A COMMON AND LEGAL PRACTICE IN SYRIA, ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS. OF THE 250 ASSEMBLY SEATS, 167 WERE IN PRACTICE RESERVED FOR THE NPF COALITION, WITH THE BA'ATH PARTY TAKING AT LEAST 131 SEATS IN LINE WITH THE REGIME'S INTERPRETATION OF CONSTITUTIONAL ARTICLE 8 STIPULATING THAT "THE BA'ATH PARTY LEADS THE STATE AND SOCIETY." SO CALLED "INDEPENDENT" CANDIDATES WERE EXPECTED TO RECEIVE NO MORE THAN 83 SEATS.

¶7. (SBU) UPON ENTERING A POLLING PLACE, VOTERS WERE APPROACHED BY A CROWD OF CANDIDATE REPRESENTATIVES, WHO OFFERED THEM PREPRINTED LISTS WITH THEIR CANDIDATE AND HIS LIST ON IT. LISTS OF "INDEPENDENT" CANDIDATES IN DAMASCUS ALSO INCLUDED A SEPARATE SECTION WITH THE NAMES OF THE 16 NPF CANDIDATES. (NOTE: DAMASCUS HAS 29 ASSEMBLY SEATS, MEANING THAT 13 SEATS COULD GO TO "INDEPENDENTS," ALTHOUGH SOME OR ALL OF THOSE WILL BE FROM INDEPENDENTS LISTS CONSIDERED VERY CLOSE TO THE REGIME. END NOTE.) VOTERS HAD THE OPTION OF FILLING IN A BLANK BALLOT OR PLACING A PREPRINTED CANDIDATE LIST IN AN ENVELOPE, WHICH WAS THEN PLACED IN A PLASTIC BALLOT BOX. AFTER DEPOSITING THEIR BALLOT IN THE BOX, VOTERS WERE REQUIRED TO DIP THEIR RIGHT THUMB OR INDEX FINGER IN PURPLE INK. VOTERS WERE BANNED BY LAW FROM CASTING A BALLOT FOR ANOTHER INDIVIDUAL.

¶8. (SBU) ALL PARTIES IN THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION BOYCOTTED THE ELECTIONS, INCLUDING THE KURDISH FUTURE MOVEMENT, WHICH DROPPED OUT DAYS BEFORE BALLOTING, CITING AN INABILITY TO DEVELOP A FULL SLATE OF CANDIDATES. THE DAMASCUS DECLARATION GROUP, THE HEART OF THE OPPOSITION, DECIDED IN MARCH AFTER EXTENSIVE INTERNAL CONVERSATIONS TO BOYCOTT THESE ELECTIONS, BELIEVING THAT ANY PARTICIPATION ALLOWED TO IT IN A SUCH A SHOW ENTERPRISE WOULD ONLY LEND THE REGIME LEGITIMACY.

